DAVID PATTERSON

Out of Bondage

THE FIFTEENTH SACKS LECTURE

OXFORD CENTRE FOR
POSTGRADUATE HEBREW STUDIES

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TWO CENTURIES OF
MODERN HEBREW LITERATURE

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MAY I first thank Sir Claus Moser for his gracious consent to take the Chair and for his very kind remarks. I would like to echo his own pleasure in seeing Dr Sacks and members of his family here. They have been faithful supporters, coming year by year, and we look forward to their presence at these lectures for many years to come.

I must confess to two difficulties concerning this lecture. The first is that I see before me a number of leading authorities in the field, and I speak in their presence with great diffidence. At the same time, while many more members of this audience are authorities in other fields, I cannot assume complete familiarity with the course of Hebrew literature over the last two centuries.

The second is that I have to attempt to cover some two hundred years in not more than forty minutes, which averages rather less than fifteen seconds a year. I hope therefore you will bear with me if much of what I have to say is telescoped, a process which runs the risk of distortion.

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The beginnings of Modern Hebrew Literature have been attributed by various scholars to a number of different periods dating as far back as the Renaissance. For the sake of convenience, however, I shall adhere to the theory that its origins may be traced to a group of Hebrew writers in Germany, and particularly Berlin, two centuries ago. The difference between Modern Hebrew Literature

and the Hebrew literature preceding it, is mainly one of spirit. Even the most cursory examination of almost three millenia of literary productivity in Hebrew, comprising the Bible, the Mishnah, the Talmud, the Midrash and the great body of medieval Hebrew literature, indicates a certain harmony between content and form. In all those strata of literature, the content is primarily Jewish, and the form consists of Hebrew, sometimes with the addition of its sister language, Aramaic. In the last 200 years, although the form, namely the langugage, has remained Hebrew, the content comprises an attempt to encompass the modern world in all its bewildering variety. Hence, the old harmony has been replaced by a series of endeavours, not all of them successful, to express the concepts and realities of the modern world in a form which has only gradually become at all adequate for that difficult task. Certainly, during the first century under review the impression is frequently that of a man wearing a suit of clothes which does not fit him, but which sags and bulges awkardly from top to bottom.

One further characteristic of Modern Hebrew Literature is equally worthy of introductory remark. Modern Hebrew Literature mirrors the political, religious, social, economic, intellectual and cultural forces affecting Jewish life over the last 200 years to a remarkable degree. It is a period which has witnessed immense changes in the structure, status, geographical distribution, and experience ranging from emancipation through genocide to statehood. The Jewish people has risen like a phoenix out of its own ashes, and it has unleashed remarkable forces of creativity. As a result, the impact of the outside world on Modern Hebrew Literature is as inescapable as the inner life of the mind. Its quality is not susceptible to purely aesthetic appreciation.

The two centuries under review fall roughly into four periods, of which the first spans approximately the

hundred years between 1790 and 1890. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, two great movements arose which were to exert a decisive impact on Jewish life. The first was the religious movement known as Hasidism which rapidly swept through large segments of the Jews in eastern Europe, particularly among the poorer and less educated sections of the communities. It was a movement which engendered enthusiasm, ecstasy, and mysticism. Largely anti-intellectual, it focused on prayer rather than study, evolving a cult of personality, a deep belief in miracles, and a passionate devotion to tales and stories as a vehicle for religious and moral teaching. Indeed, the Hasidic tale made an important contribution to Modern Hebrew Literature, frequently overlooked by historians of literature. It is difficult to exaggerate the impact of Hasidism, both as a positive and as a devisive force in Jewish life during the nineteenth century.

The second major factor affecting Modern Hebrew Literature in its first one hundred years was the Hebrew movement of Enlightenment, known as *Haskalah*. An offshoot of the eighteenth century European Enlightenment, with its emphasis on reason, sweetness and light, and the brotherhood of man, the movement of *Haskalah* appeared to many Jews in western and central Europe to offer the means of of escape from the ghetto and achieve emancipation and acceptance in the glittering society of European civilisation and culture. Through much of the nineteenth century, Jews hitched their aspirations to an eighteenth century star, pinning their faith on an enlightenment which was increasingly supplanted by the rise of socialism and nationalism which were destined to shape the modern world. If I may resort to an image I have used elsewhere, the Jews came charging into the nineteenth century on an eighteenth century wagon. Hence, the curious air of unreality which colours Jewish aspirations during the period.

For many Jews the passionate desire to enter European society and culture seemed to demand a reform in religion to undermine the barriers separating Jews from their gentile neighbours, and no less importantly, a reform in education which would enable the Jewish child to fit more easily into the outside world. As Hebrew was the only literary language then at the disposal of the Jews, educational reform could be expressed only by the creation, or translation from European languages, of a new kind of Hebrew literature with the aim of bringing European culture into Jewish life. The rise of Modern Hebrew Literature, is therefore, the direct result of a passionate attempt to change the forms of Jewish life in the search for emancipation and equality.

At this point I ought, perhaps to recall that Jews living in Europe largely spoke Yiddish. In Germany, in Holland, and in France – not to mention eastern Europe – the vernacular was mainly Yiddish. When they wanted, therefore, to come to grips from an educational point of view with the new concepts of western Europe, they had to resort to the sole literary language at their disposal, namely Hebrew; and it was this new use of Hebrew as a vehicle for education to meet the needs of the modern world which is at the root of the rise of Modern Hebrew Literature.

This new Hebrew literature, however, was conditioned by a second and apparently contradictory factor. In searching for a stratum of Hebrew which might help to unleash aesthetic and emotional aspects of personality which during the long centuries in the ghetto had seemed to suffer atrophy, the exponents of *Haskalah*, known as *Maskilim*, became convinced that only the Hebrew of the Bible, which reflects an independent life in ancient Israel, and which comprises poetry and prose of the highest literary quality, could achieve their aesthetic aims. Hence, almost every Hebrew author in the first hundred years of Modern Hebrew Literature attempted to write in

a neo-Biblical style, using the very limited vocabulary of the Hebrew Bible. Now, the Hebrew Bible contains only a little over five thousand different words, of which some six hundred are *hapax legomena* – that is, they appear only once. If you take any English dictionary and confine yourself to such common words as cat, dog, house, man, you find that it greatly exceeds five thousand. In other words, the Hebrew of the Bible contains a very restrictive vocabulary in which to express complex modern ideas. The attempt to express the concepts of the modern world in such restricted language produced a paradoxical situation which put their literary aspirations in rigid fetters. Their well intentioned theories produced a kind of bondage which severely restricted Hebrew literature and made it artificial and pretentious in the extreme. Indeed, the fact that much interesting fiction was nevertheless produced in neo-Biblical Hebrew, remains a tribute to the courage, tenacity, and deep loyalty of so many writers to the Hebrew language. Moreover, as virtually every author throughout this period considered it his bounden duty to launch upon a literary career with the publication of at least one poem and preferably a book of poetry, regardless of ability, Hebrew literature in its first hundred years is characterised by an abundance of poetry, almost all of which is distressingly mediocre.

It is indicative for example, that the *Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, compiled and edited by T. Carmi, which is an anthology of Hebrew poetry from the earliest to most modern times, does not include a single poem written between the years 1790–1890 – not one! I think that is a little harsh. He might have chosen one or two. But the editor certainly made his point.

In Germany, where it began, the reign of Modern Hebrew Literature was short-lived because the Jewish communities were comparatively small and German culture acted as a powerful magnet. Hebrew literature in its clumsy neo-Biblical form flourished only as long as it

took a generation of young Jews to learn German, by which time they abandoned the inferior instrument in favour of a superior one, and embraced German language and literature with enthusiasm. Fortunately, seeds of *Haskalah* were carried by wandering scholars from Germany to the much more fertile soil of eastern Europe, where the more numerous and concentrated Jewish communities were largely surrounded by an ignorant peasant population which posed no cultural threat.

Via the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Modern Hebrew Literature struck deep roots in the Pale of Settlement, the area of Czarist Russia to which Jews were confined after the partitions of Poland had presented Russia with a very numerous and largely unwanted Jewish population. As is well known, the partitions of Poland at the end of the eighteenth century incorporated a section of Poland into the Russian Empire which was inhabited by no less than a million Jews, who suddenly found that they were no longer citizens of Poland, but of Czarist Russia. Throughout the nineteenth century, the growing oppression of the Czarist administration against a rapidly expanding and increasingly impoverished Jewish community was compounded by acute internal dissension in the form of a three-cornered struggle between the old orthodox, the adherents of Hasidism, and the exponents of Enlightenment, the *Maskilim*.

The terrors of a military conscription entailing for many unfortunates twenty five years of service in the Czarist Army were compounded by the vicious pogroms following the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881. As the Jewish population exploded into a plethora of young people, growing despair led to mass migration westwards and a flight from Judaism into the revolutionary socialist movements. The crumbling of the established pillars of Jewish life led to a crisis of faith and the undermining of social structures which for centuries had imposed discipline and restraint. Simultaneously, the growth of Jewish

Nationalism, along with Socialism, became substitutes for religion and opened up well-springs of determined action.

All these forces, both external and internal, are reflected in Hebrew literature in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century. In spite of the intensity of experience, Hebrew writers clung valiantly, but with increasing difficulty, to the neo-Biblical style which placed such severe restrictions on their means of expression. Their stories and novels comprise a strange mixture of romantic adventure and harsh social criticism, of which the latter element represented their main purpose while the former was used as a device to retain the readers' attention, especially as much of the literature first appeared in serial form. By 1890, however, the limits of a neo-Biblical style had long been reached, and the literary theory which had been dominant for no less than a hundred years had to be abandoned in order to free the literature from an artificial and largely meaningless bondage.

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The second main division in Modern Hebrew Literature spans the twenty five years prior to the outbreak of the First World War. From 1890 onwards the political, social, and spiritual crisis in Jewish life appears to have unleashed creative forces which led to a striking advance. The emergence of a veritable galaxy of talented Hebrew writers in poetry, fiction, and the essay form together with the abandonment of the artificial literary theory, the use of a much wider vocabulary and greater syntactical flexibility, produced a veritable literary renaissance. I have deliberately avoided mention of individual authors because otherwise it might appear like a catalogue. But a galaxy of talented writers would include Mendele, Bialik, Berdichevsky, Ahad Haam, Brenner, Gnessin, and a host of other authors of great ability. Whereas throughout the nineteenth century Hebrew Literature had lagged behind European literature by some three or four decades, from

approximately 1890 it performed a great leap forward, virtually catching up with current trends in the outside world. While the former period of Modern Hebrew Literature is interesting for the historian of literature, the linguist or the social historian, the second period possesses an aesthetic validity which makes it worth reading for its own sake to this day. In many ways it may be regarded as the classical period of Modern Hebrew literature which still commands considerable respect. Although throughout this period, Hebrew was still a literary language to all intents and purposes, the liveliness and flexibility of style, the eloquence and grace and the admirable variety of poetic form, endow it with enduring appeal. Once having cast away its trammels, the literature appears to have emerged fully-fledged and greatly enriched in two important ways.

Whereas the poetry of the previous hundred years is largely the product of a belief that Hebrew poetry should be written almost as a national duty to stimulate the aesthetic and emotional experience of the Jews emerging from the ghetto, and therefore reflects poetic experience artificially and through a veil of non-participation, the poetry in the period under review hews its material from the deepest seams of Jewish tradition and experience and thereby gives expression to genuine emotion. It deals with human truth which is the essence of great poetry and it reflects a genuine feeling for the natural rhythms of Hebrew and its magic spring of language.

Secondly, the literature in this period of renaissance, succeeded in incorporating into Hebrew a wide range of the finest literature, ancient and modern, through the medium of excellent translation. The widening of horizons engendered by this injection of European literature in its broadest sense is difficult to exaggerate. Certainly, Modern Hebrew Literature ceased to be parochial and acquired a broader human dimension. One further aspect of the period is worthy of remark. The crisis of faith at the

turn of the century and the flight from traditional Judaism gave rise to a new phenomenon in Jewish life and literature, namely the disaffected intellectual, the angry young man who tries to escape from his environment without the necessary European education to strike deep roots or ever feel at home in the wider world beyond the confines of the Pale of Settlement. Suspended hopelessly between two worlds, the largely passive anti-hero dominated much of the fiction of the period which is reflective, introspective, pessimistic and intensely personal. It is the culmination of the ghetto in decline and it exerts a powerful, if depressing, impact.

I would like to dwell on this aspect for a moment. A large number of young men who went through the traditional educational system – *Cheder* and the *Yeshiva* – and were steeped in the traditional sources, mastering the Talmud, Midrash and the Codes, and everything connected with them, suddenly through contact with ideas from the outsidew world came to the conclusion that everything that they had learned up to that time, be it at the age of eighteeen, nineteen or twenty, was useless, of no value to them, of no relevance in the modern world, of no help in coming to grips with the outside culture which was their aim. Rightly or wrongly they abandoned their own culture and attempted, often at an advanced age – which meant sitting as adults in a class with eleven or twelve year olds – to acquire the Russian education which would allow them entrance to university. It was a tragic period in Jewish life – a tragic period in the life of many of the individuals concerned. It gave rise to a type which in Hebrew is known as *Talush* – a person suspended between two worlds. Much of the Hebrew literature of the period is concerned with this particular kind of psychological and spiritual tragedy. Hebrew literature also resorted to a wide range of contemporary literary techniques, including stream of consciousness, and its influence on later Hebrew fiction has been profound.

Together with a parallel growth in Yiddish literature – which I must leave to our distinguished Yiddishists to describe on some other occasion – it reflects Jewish life in Europe prior to World War I to a remarkable degree.

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The third great period in Modern Hebrew Literature partially overlaps with the period just described. From the first decade of the twentieth century until the outbreak of the Second World War, Hebrew literature was gradually transferred from Europe to *Eretz Yisrael* (the land of Israel) in a most unusual process reflecting the paradox of diaspora life. I am deliberately using the term *Eretz Yisrael*, partly to avoid the necessity of fluctuating between Palestine and Israel depending on whether the date is before or after 1948, but more importantly beause it reflects the image of the land in the minds of the writers. *Eretz Yisrael* is a concept, and when I refrain from using it, I do so for deliberate reasons.

The writers involved in these personal odysseys were deeply affected by the changes in landscape, setting, social structures, and language patterns which they encountered when they moved from Europe to *Eretz Yisrael*. Moreover, the rosy vision of the Holy Land so fondly cherished in the diaspora was soon shattered by the harsh reality of Palestine. Still writing for a readership largely in the European diaspora, Hebrew writers were now faced with the Herculean task of persuading their readers to abandon Europe and follow in their footsteps to the old/new homeland. As this aim was unlikely to be achieved by describing the harshness of the new situation, many writers resorted to a romantic depiction of *Eretz Yisrael* in the hope of attracting immigrants in sufficient numbers to modify reality in accordance with their vision.

I would like to dwell for a moment on this aspect, which I have written about elsewhere. There is a striking difference between the writer in exile in Hebrew literature and in literature in general. As in so many aspects of

Jewish history, the situation is a reversal of the norm. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries London, for example, was a haven for writers in exile from Russia and other countries, who were living in Britain and writing for a readership in their native land, with the aim of changing the social and political conditions so that they could return to their readers. In Jewish life of this period Hebrew writers left Europe and went to *Eretz Yisrael* which both they and their readers regarded as their true homeland. Their readership remained in Europe which both writers and readers regarded as exile. They, therefore, had the task of trying to write in such a manner as to persuade their readers to come to them. In other words, they were not concerned to change conditions in Russia or elsewhere in order to go back to their readers, but to bring their readership to *Eretz Yisrael*. It was a case, if the metaphor may be employed, of the mountain going to Mohammed. Hebrew writers wanted to attract their readers to come in sufficient numbers to be able to change the existing reality to fit their romantic vision. In that case, the last thing a writer would want to do was to describe things as they were. Otherwise, who would come? This is an important factor to bear in mind when reading the literature of the period.

In 1918 a tiny Jewish population of some 65,000 souls had to attempt to shoulder an immense burden of culture which European Jewry had accumulated slowly and painfully over long periods and with a population reaching many millions. In the following two decades the Jewish population of *Eretz Yisrael* increased tenfold, due first to emigration from Russia following the Russian Revolution – which severed the most creative section of European Jewry from the body politic – and secondly, due to growing Nazi persecution and threat. By 1939 the *Yishuv*, as the Jewish population of *Eretz Yisrael* was called, had reached a total of 600,000 souls. Moreover, in the intervening 20 years, another important change had taken place.

The revival of Modern Hebrew as a spoken language is one of the most dramatic aspects of modern Jewish history. As recently as 1881 there was probably not a single person in the world whose sole language was Hebrew. By 1939 it was spoken by a large proportion of the *Yishuv*. Since the dominant pronunciation was Sephardi, writers arriving from Europe where the Askenazi pronunciation was the norm, were forced to adopt the Sephardi mode with a concomitant change of stress and pronunciation. For the poets in particular, the change was difficult and unsettling in the extreme. Poets have very sensitive ears, and if a person grows up pronouncing words with a particular stress and in a particular way, and then suddenly has to change both the stress, and in many cases, the pronunciation, it can be a traumatic experience as far as poetic creativity is concerned. Between the period separating Chaucer and Shakespeare for example, English went through a similar change of stress, and it is not without interest that the amount of good poetry written during that period drops dramatically. It takes time before people get used to a new way of pronouncing words. If for example, you are a songwriter, and have grown up from childhood rhyming *miss* with *kiss*, and then you find that from a certain day you have to pronounce one of them *mit* – it could be very unsettling. That is just one of countless, comparable examples whose totality represented a very difficult change.

During the inter-war period, Hebrew literature gradually acclimatised to the new reality of *Eretz Yisrael*. While many writers continued to draw upon diaspora experience for their themes, more and more the local and contemporary scene provided the subject matter for fiction and poetry alike. But whereas the prose was by and large sober, restrained, and literary, the poetry became more expressionist, surprising and explosive, grappling with the problems of pioneering and defence with strange and sometimes shocking imagery. The roads

and houses of a new settlement, for example, could be daringly likened to the straps and boxes of phylacteries.

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The fourth and final period of this saga roughly comprises the literature of the State of Israel from its foundation in 1948. Although the first two decades of the State are still dominated in fiction by major figures who were born in the diaspora and had made the transition from Europe to *Eretz Yisrael* and reached the peak of their creativity after the creation of the State, the reading public in Israel suddenly became aware of a new generation of Sabra, that is, native or almost native writers who appeared upon the scene in the forties and fifties of this century. This younger generation of writers was immediately distinguishable by the following characteristics: in the first place they represented the first generation of native speakers of Hebrew, for whom the spoken language was natural and uninhibited and who peppered their writings with Kibbutz and Army slang. Again, they were the first generation of Hebrew writers for whom the reality of *Eretz Yisrael* was the only one they had experienced, and for whom the landscape was their natural environment. Again, their personalities were largely moulded by the unremitting struggle for independence and statehood, while their values were by and large conformist with the ideals of the fledgling State. To many of their readers they appeared better balanced and less neurotic than their diaspora peers, while the heroes of their fiction tended to be collective, representing the Kibbutz, the Palmach, and the Army. Less introspective and self-critical than Hebrew writers who were born and had grown up in the diaspora, their writings were regarded as healthier if less sophisticated.

At the end of World War II, the revelation of the unspeakable horrors perpetrated in the deathcamps of Europe exacerbated the struggle for independence and statehood in *Eretz Yisrael*. The creation of the State of

Israel and the War of Independence generated both in the *Yishuv* and in world Jewry a remarkable uplift of the spirit and a sense of triumph and fulfilment which were reinforced in the Sinai campaign of 1956 and especially following the six-day war in 1967 when Jerusalem was reunited. In the meantime, the Jewish population of Palestine had increased enormously, mainly by immigration, and cultural life proliferated. Subsequent wars – Yom Kippur and Lebanon as well as the constant threat of terrorist action – induced a mood of sobriety and apprehension and an increasing questioning of the accepted values of the State. The *Yishuv* had experienced a growing polarisation of right and left in politics as well as religion versus secularism. The change of Israel's image from a fledgling David to a repressive Goliath with the country increasingly – and very unfairly – depicted as a pariah state has greatly affected the Sabra's self-esteem and confidence. In this respect, at least, even Sabras have become Jews.

From the 1960's Hebrew literature has imbibed a sizable dose of private neurosis. The influence of Kafka and Agnon manifested in the dissolution of fixatives, a sense of nightmare and unease, and symbols of forgetfulness and loss, is apparent in a younger generation of writers (now no longer young) who were influenced by and have subsequently themselves influenced an older generation of Sabra writers. Convictions have yielded place to uncertainties. The Israeli-Arab conflict, the enduring refugee problem (a kind of mirror image of homeless Jewry), the increasing encroachment of the Holocaust on Jewish consciousness, constitute problems that simply will not go away.

More and more serious Hebrew literature in Israel has become a sounding board for the ills of society and state. The prose is sensitive, aware, compelling and often prolix. Aaron Appelfeld, alone perhaps, understands the secret of artistic economy, the power of implication, and

in his treatment of the Holocaust the superiority of the indirect approach over frontal assault. Certainly the sense of unease, of threat, of irrevocable loss, of the struggle to retain some shreds of human dignity in the face of bestial abasement which his writings convey make him a major figure on the world scene of literature. No less powerful because of implication, association, symbol and image, is the poetry of Israel – already comprising three or four poetic generations. The wonderful movement up and down literary avenues spanning millenia which could produce such a magnificent image as: "The man under his fig tree telephoned the man under his vine", or the unbearable poignancy of the following lines:

> "Written in Pencil in the Sealed Freight Car
> Here in this carload, I, Eve, with my
> son Able. If you see my older boy
> Cain, the son of Adam, tell him that I . . ."

reflect a depth of experience that has few equals.

Freed at last from artificial literary theories and the confining trammels of restricted vocabulary, Hebrew literature has come of age and attained an enviable maturity.

What can I add, except perhaps to those of you who have not yet mastered Hebrew, please begin learning it at once!